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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly describes the geographic region and some indigenous artifacts of Micronesia. The state of art historical research in the area and currently available library resources are discussed. Micronesia is comprised of seven island nations peopled by distinctly unique cultural groups. Study of Micronesian art and architecture is relatively recent. Early work was done by German, then Japanese, expeditions. More recently, Americans, as well as European and Japanese researchers, have studied the art and cultures of Micronesia. Among art forms studied are latte stones, dating from 1000 A.D. to 1668 A.D. These were hand smoothed and fitted limestone columns and capstones used to construct A-frame houses for the Chamorros, a people of the Mariana Islands group. The bai, a communal village house of Palau, is decorated with sculptures expressing a complex iconography of mythological symbolism. Another architectural accomplishment of Micronesians are the stone cities of Pohnpei and Kosrae, dating from the 8th-9th centuries to 1830. The largest collection of Micronesian art history materials available in the islands is the collection at the University of Guam (Mangilao). Other collections are located in the Palau National Museum Library in Koror, Palau; the Community College of Micronesia Pacific Collection in Kolonia, Pohnpei; The Nieves Flores Public Library in Agana, Guam; and the Federated States of Micronesia National Archives in Palikir, Pohnpe. Collections of library resources also can be found outside the area at the University of Hawaii; the Spanish archives in the Phillippines, Seville, and Madrid; and the Jesuit archives in Rome. Many materials remain uncatalogued and unindexed, a situation the Micronesian Area Research Center would like to address. An in-process integrated computer network will make access to these resources feasible in the future. (MM)

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MICRONESIAN ART HISTORICAL RESEARCH

AND

LIBRARY COLLECTION RESOURCES IN MICRONESIA

Paper presented to the Art Education Delegation Exchange, co-sponsored by the People-to-People Citizen Ambassador Program and the Ministry of Culture of the People's Democratic Republic of China

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Micronesia is one of the major geographical divisions of the tropical Pacific Islands, bounded on the north by the Tropic of Cancer and on the south by the Equator (Figure 1). Its farthest western boundary is along the islands of the Republic of Palau. On the east the region is bounded by the islands of the Republic of Kiribati. The area of this region is vast, being only about a quarter less than the territory of the People's Republic of China. Micronesia is not well known even today in countries outside the Pacific area.

The purpose of this brief paper is to introduce the region, present a sampling of its art, and discuss the state of art historical research within the area, particularly with an eye to describing the library resources currently available in Micronesia for Micronesian art historical research. Finally, the future prospects for this research and the development of library resources to support this research are summarized.

Micronesia is comprised of seven nations or states with varying political statuses, five of which have some type of primary political association with the United States (1). Each island group has a distinct people, language, culture, and art, although the current generally accepted theory is that the Micronesians' origin is from Southeast Asia (2).

The systematic study of Micronesian art and architecture is relatively quite recent. Cursory written observations and prints were made by European explorers and missionaries since the seventeenth century, such as in Figure 2. But the beginning of scholarship of Micronesian art history lies with the German expeditions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly the South Seas Expedition launched by the University of Hamburg from 1908 to 1910 (3). In many aspects, the multivolume publications from this expedition remain the most comprehensive and authentic studies of traditional Micronesian art and iconography, before Western influences and acculturation "muddy the waters". These studies are ultimately essential in their photographs of objects and structures now lost and in their extensive early interviews with the people regarding the cultural significance, oral history, and iconography of the artifacts and structures.

The next major period of scholarship was during the Japanese occupation of Micronesia from 1919 to 1944. The body of this work, concentrating on recording the mythology, lore and iconography of the area, is not even now fully accessible to scholars. Much of it was lost during World War II, and most of the remaining works are scarce, unloanable, or uncopyable, requiring special permissions and travel to the institutions in Japan to examine them.

From the end of the Second World War to the present, art history scholarship has been mostly from the Americans, Europeans, and Japanese. Yet the scholars studying Micronesian art and architecture from the late nineteenth century to the present have almost

all been anthropologists by training. Even today, only a handful of art historians are actively engaged in this research (4).

It is not possible in this brief paper to give a comprehensive account of the types of artifacts and structures characteristic of each island group of Micronesia. Nevertheless, a few samples follow.

On Guam and the rest of the Mariana Islands, the most characteristic artifacts from the indigenous people, the Chamorros, are the latte stones, which were the foundations of the houses of the upper class (Figure 3) (5). A latte set consists of a quarried limestone column and a capstone. No mortar is used to set the capstone upon the column. Early prints of the latte show that the stone was worked to be rather smooth, and the fitting of the capstone upon the column to be quite tight and expert. The latte were arranged as shown in Figure 4 to provide a foundation support for an A-frame house made of wood and thatch, tied together with vegetable-fiber cords.

The latte stage of Mariana architecture was relatively recent. The earliest Carbon-14 dating of the sites is from ca. 1,000 A.D. The puzzle of how this structural technique was introduced into Chamorro architecture remains unsolved. Regardless, the construction of new latte ceased soon after the establishment of the first Spanish missions on Guam in 1668. The latte sites themselves were abandoned within a century after this date.

The art of Palau is of special interest in its particularly complex iconography and the rich mythological symbolism of its icons. The best examples of this complex iconography are the paintings and sculptures used to decorate the bai, communal village houses that served a number of social functions, particularly as meeting-houses for the men. Figure 5 shows the bai of Irrai village, the last "old bai" left on Palau. Again, there is the A-frame raised construction, with some similarities to the Chamorro upper-class house and to other houses in many other Pacific cultures. Set within the gable formed by the overhanging roof are smoothed, fitted planks, each one being a painted frieze. The paintings are contemporary or heavily repainted, but true to traditional form and content.

The friezes depict legends of deities, semi-divine ancestors, or mythological origins, such as in Figure 6. The frieze is a complete narrative unit, reading from left to right. The style is flat and linear, without any attempt toward naturalism. Yet the figures are dynamic, and the composition respects its rectangular frame. The frieze is entirely successful for what it is intended: to teach or remind the viewer of one of the legends important to the village or clan.

Other motifs on the bai facade, such as the row of beads along the outer timber support of the roof, and the row along the lower lintel of the entrance, have definite symbolic meanings (Figure 5). In this case, they refer to one of the several kinds of

Palauan "money", whose complexity in Palauan society has occupied much study by many worthy scholars. Although it is possible that the facades of these bai have unified iconographical schemes and meanings, their interpretation has not yet been satisfactorily expounded.

The upper lintels of the bai facades were also decorated with wooden statuary. One of the most common depictions is the woman or goddess with splayed legs, known as the dilukai figure (Figure 7). Several iconographical interpretations of this figure have been proposed, but none of them are universally accepted, even among the present-day Palauan people. The figures are stylized, with an emphasis on volumetric masses. As can be seen from Figures 8 and 9, there were regional or temporal variations in style, but it may no longer be possible to classify these styles because of the dearth of the specimens extant. The finest and earliest specimens of the dilukai, as is the case with all other Micronesian objects, are in European museums and private collections, having been brought back to Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by visiting explorers and anthropologists. It can be assumed that the emergent Micronesian nations will soon join the ongoing international debate of who owns what in such circumstances.

The island of Yap remains one of the least developed and Westernized in all Micronesia. Traditional cultural bonds and practices are relatively intact. It is one of the few islands where rituals and feasts, with concomitant dancing and chanting, continue to be traditionally practiced (Figure 10). In this photograph, students of the history of costume and personal decoration will find little change from the early prints and photographs of Yap, with the exception that tattooing and scarification are not now widely practiced.

The most remarkable architectural accomplishments of the aboriginal peoples of Micronesia are the stone cities of Pohnpei and Kosrae. The largest of these, on the island of Pohnpei, is still known by its ancient name: Nan Madol (Figure 11). The complex is composed of ninety-two man-made islets, built up from the reef with quarried basalt blocks (6). The earliest Carbon-14 dates from Nan Madol are from the eighth to ninth centuries A.D. The site was abandoned around 1830, soon after contact with the West. The city is thought to have been a ceremonial religious center and the home of the priests and upper class. Archaeological excavation of the site is still continuing.

The city is fascinating, both from a scholarly view and from its esthetic impact. By boat, one winds through small canals around temples and tombs constructed with the utmost skill from quarried basalt blocks (Figures 12 and 13). The blocks are tightly fitted in alternating rows of stretchers and headers; no mortar is used. The walls were not finished over or smoothed on the inside or outside, and were undecorated. Little is known of the great civilization that produced these cities. It is theorized that they were built in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries during

the unification of the Pohnpeian people by an overlord or high priest, known in the Pohnpeian language as the saudeleur.

Finally, to close this brief sampling of Micronesian art, the group of carved wooden figures from the Caroline Islands must be noted (Figures 14, 15, and 16). The figures look strikingly modern in their simplified, volumetric rendering. They bear a similarity to figures one finds all the way from sub-Saharan Africa to Oceania; yet the Micronesian figures are the most economical of them all in their paring down of detail and emphasis on discrete, pure, volumetric masses with no surface ornamentation. These figures are thought to be representations of deities, but that supposition is far from certain.

My purpose in presenting these objects and structures to a group of artists and art historians of varied backgrounds and interests is to introduce this field of study. For many of you, these may be the first examples of Micronesian art you have seen, as opposed to the more widely known Polynesian and Melanesian examples. From this short introduction, I hope you can see that Micronesian art is quite distinct from that of its Oceanic neighbors, even though cross-influences are apparent.

What of the study of Micronesian art in Micronesia? Every developing area in the world is taking a new interest in scholarship of its arts coming from within the indigenous region, rather than solely from the bastions of American and European universities. So this question posed now toward Micronesia is both timely and pertinent.

The only four-year university in Micronesia is the University of Guam, which also has a few Master's degree programs and is developing others. Our university is an American university, in the sense that we are structured along the American model in higher education, and in the sense that Guam is an unincorporated American territory. Yet most of our faculty, our students, and the people of Guam want us to retain a sense of being a little different from stateside universities by retaining and honoring our unique Guamanian values and heritage.

The University of Guam is the only present candidate from which to form a Micronesian resource for the study of Micronesian art. That process has now begun with the large-scale expansion of facilities and programs underway. Besides access to the original objects, another requirement for successful research support in art history is adequate library collection resources, including photographic and slide collections. These resources are also now being expanded at the university.

The largest collection of library materials in Micronesia relating to Micronesian art history is at the Micronesian Area Research Center at the university. Other key art history collections are in the region, each of which has a large number of important, scarce items relating to their own island group. A major preoccupation in Micronesian art historical research is

iconography, which means, in Micronesian art, the religious, folkloric, and social meaning and context of the object (7). Every one of these key library collections has very scarce or unique materials in this regard.

The Micronesian Area Research Center at the University of Guam has a library collection of about 35,000 books, 50,000 photographs, and a large number of manuscripts and archives. Much of the collection remains uncataloged or unindexed. The center also has an important Spanish Documents Collection, which is comprised mostly of photocopies of Micronesian materials found in the various archives of Spain and Italy. The Nieves Flores Public Library in Agana, Guam, has a small Pacific Collection of about 5,000 books, mostly rare materials relating to Guam.

The Palau National Museum Library in Koror, Palau has a collection of about 15,000 items, most of which are uncataloged. It is especially rich in manuscripts dealing with Palauan lore, religion, and iconography.

The Community College of Micronesia Pacific Collection in Kolonia, Pohnpei, has about 20,000 items on Pohnpei and Micronesia in general. The collection has been particularly well maintained, and contains a number of important, unique items relating to Micronesian art. The Federated States of Micronesia National Archives in Palikir, Pohnpei, incorporating one set of the Archives of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, is another important resource for students of Micronesian art history that should not be overlooked. This collection is on microfilm, and is indexed and retrievable in a computerized database.

These five collections, along with a few other sites that have microfilm copies of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands Archives, are the entirety of relevant library resources in Micronesia. Outside of the area, the large Pacific Collection of the University of Hawaii has many Micronesian materials, and a handful of American and European libraries have significant Micronesian collections. The Spanish archives in the Philippines, Seville, and Madrid, as well as the Jesuit archives in Rome, are important sources. Many of the relevant materials in the European archives have been photocopied and are available at the Micronesian Area Research Center, but a thorough, systematic search of all these archives has not yet been completed.

Plans are underway for the Micronesian Area Research Center to become the premiere collection for research on Micronesia, including art historical research. Copies of pertinent items from all the collections outside Micronesia will be housed at this library. In addition, increased funding for the center will make it possible for the center to purchase all newly printed works on the area, and to selectively purchase the older rare materials.

Once the materials are gathered and cataloged at the Micronesian Area Research Center, the issue of making these materials readily

available throughout the world will be addressed. The catalogs and indexes for these materials will also need to be made readily accessible.

An integrated computer network for the University of Guam will begin to be installed in early 1992. This network will eventually contain the catalogs for all the libraries on campus and on the island, including that of the Micronesian Area Research Center. Remote access to these catalogs via computer terminals and modems is also being planned. The telecommunications infrastructure for Guam and Micronesia is also now being enhanced, so that worldwide remote access to our resources on Micronesian research will be feasible. The entire campus network should be in place within the next five years, although portions of it will be phased in and operational before that time. Interlibrary loan electronic document delivery will also be enhanced, an important consideration because of our geographical isolation and the slow rate of mail delivery.

Low cost, high quality electronic transmission of colored images such as photographs and slides is not yet available. If the projections are true that this technology will be marketed within the next ten years, another feature important to art scholarship will be added to these Micronesian databases.

While these electronic means of information exchange are being installed, our university solicits cooperative efforts to build our general art history slide and photography collection, which is in its beginnings. Perhaps some arrangement can be made with other universities across the world to provide us copyright-free copies of slides and photographs in their areas of specialization, while we return the favor by supplying the same in Micronesian art. The University of Guam would be interested in discussing such cooperative efforts in art history education and scholarship with all interested parties.

NOTES

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6. ibid.; pp. 58-89

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